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Environment and Climate Change Canada

Review of the St. Lawrence Program, 2011 to 2015

Lessons Learned

April 2018

Canada

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The deputy heads of Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) approved this report on April 25, 2018, and it is published on the ECCC website in both official languages.

This document was prepared by the Evaluation Division of the Audit and Evaluation Branch.

List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

AEB	Audit and Evaluation Branch
ASC	Agreement Steering Committee
CC	Coordination Committee
CIP	Community Interaction Program
ECCC	Environment and Climate Change Canada
FSDS	Federal Sustainable Development Strategy
G&Cs	Grants and contributions
IMSL	Integrated management of the St. Lawrence
MC	Monitoring Committee (within the Agreement management structure)
MDDELCC	Ministère du Développement durable, de l'Environnement et de la Lutte contre les changements climatiques du Québec [Quebec Department of Sustainable Development, the Environment and the Fight Against Climate]
NGO	non-governmental organization
RRT	Regional Round Tables
SLAP	St. Lawrence Action Plan
SLGO	St. Lawrence Global Observatory
SSL	Stratégies Saint-Laurent
SSLMP	State of the St. Lawrence River Monitoring Program
WG	working group (within the Agreement management structure)
ZIP	Zones d'intervention prioritaire [Priority Intervention Zone (program or committee)]

Table of Contents

1. Background 1
2. What worked well 3
3. What could be improved 5
4. Lessons learned 7
5. Conclusion and management response 9

1. Background

Environment and Climate Change Canada's (ECCC) St. Lawrence Program was implemented under the Canada-Quebec Agreement on the St. Lawrence, 2011 to 2026. The program, also called the St. Lawrence Action Plan (SLAP), is defined in the federal Sustainable Ecosystems program. It commits the federal and provincial governments to the conservation, preservation and restoration of the St. Lawrence ecosystem from a perspective of sustainable development and multi-stakeholder collaboration. As well, the program provides the leadership, oversight and coordination needed to ensure the overall governance of the SLAP, and reports on the outcomes achieved jointly by the Government of Canada and the Government of Quebec.

Since 1988, the governments of Canada and Quebec have worked together, under four five-year agreements, to conserve and enhance the St. Lawrence ecosystem. In April 2016, the SLAP was renewed to 2021, to ensure the implementation of the five-year, 2016 to 2021 phase of the 2011 to 2026 Canada-Quebec Agreement on the St. Lawrence.

The renewal of the 2016 to 2021 program indicates that it continues to meet a demonstrable need, that its objectives correspond to federal government priorities, and that it complies with federal government duties and responsibilities.

2011 to 2026 Canada-Quebec Agreement on the St. Lawrence

The 2011 to 2026 Canada-Quebec Agreement on the St. Lawrence is an agreement between the federal and provincial governments. It builds on the four previous agreements implemented since 1988. The action plan drawn up under the Agreement reflects the importance of a long-term commitment to the St. Lawrence River. This commitment includes the collaboration and the efforts of 10 federal government departments and agencies and eight Quebec government departments.

Management of the Agreement is based on an integrated approach that fosters joint action and collaboration on the part of the stakeholders. One of the purposes of this Agreement is to continue carrying out integrated, joint projects involving both governments, in partnership with external collaborators. The Agreement identifies three priority issues that will be the focus of joint action over the 15 years (from 2011 to 2026):

- biodiversity and habitat conservation
- improved water quality
- sustainable use

Resource allocation

For the period from 2011 to 2016, ECCC's financial commitments for the St. Lawrence sub-program (1.3.5) totalled $37 million. Of this amount, $2,250,000 was transferred to the Government of Quebec, in accordance with the terms of Appendix G of the Agreement (ECCC Financial Contribution to the Ministère du Développement durable, de l'Environnement et de la Lutte contre les

changements climatiques du Québec). The contribution is used to support activities carried out under the St. Lawrence Monitoring Program and the Numerical Environmental Prediction Program for the St. Lawrence, as well as some of the projects under the five-year Joint Action Programs (from 2011 to 2016 and from 2016 to 2021).

In order of importance, ECCC funds were allocated to:

- activities pertaining to le Suivi de l'état du Saint-Laurent (monitoring the state of the St. Lawrence) – 38%
- the grants and contributions programs for les Zones d'intervention prioritaires (areas of prime concern - ZIP) and le Programme Interactions communautaires (community interaction program - PIC) – 22%
- joint action programs – 19%
- logistical support and general communications – 10%

Over this same period, ECCC's financial commitments account for 70% of the federal government's contribution and 53% of the financial commitments of both governments.

About the review

Originally, the Audit and Evaluation Branch's (AEB) Evaluation Division undertook to evaluate all of ECCC's SLAP activities under the 2011-2026 Canada-Quebec Agreement on the St. Lawrence for the period from 2011 to 2015. The evaluation also examined two ECCC financial contribution mechanisms, namely the CIP projects funded by ECCC and the ZIP program. The Regional Round Tables (RRT), which operate under the aegis of the Quebec government, and the CIP projects funded by the MDDELCC were not included in the scope of this evaluation.

The approach used consisted of various methods that combined qualitative and quantitative analyses, including a review of documents, interviews with key respondents and an online survey of external stakeholders.

At the outset, the Audit and Evaluation Branch's Evaluation Division committed to conducting an evaluation of all of ECCC's SLAP-related activities under the Canada-Quebec Agreement on the St. Lawrence 2011 to 2026, for the period from 2011 to 2015. However, since the St. Lawrence Program was renewed during the evaluation period, no recommendations were made for the program. Instead, the evaluation team looked at the elements of the program that worked well and those that could be improved. Based on this analysis, it then developed some lessons learned to help guide the St. Lawrence Program and similar programs in the future.

2. What worked well

The evaluation team reviewed those program aspects in which ECCC's SLAP Coordination Office had participated that had worked well and that enabled it to achieve and exceed the expected outcomes.

Collaborative framework

The review concluded that there was a collaborative framework in place to ensure that SLAP-related activities were planned and monitored. It is operational and makes it easier to bring the main players together to deal with major issues, pool expertise and resources, and share information and data. The collaborative framework also helps participating organizations stay informed on St. Lawrence River activities planned by either the two levels of government or within their own organization. The Agreement Management Framework specifies the steps to be taken by SLAP stakeholders to share among themselves the information (data, metadata, software programs, models and documents) owned by the federal or the Quebec government, and to develop common products. The framework also outlines the roles and responsibilities of the members of various committees and working groups comprising the Agreement management structure.

Stakeholder mobilization, collaboration and joint activities

Overall, the program has contributed to increased collaboration, consultation and mobilization among the main stakeholders working within the framework of the Agreement management structure. The involvement of government and other stakeholders is consistent with the program objectives. It is considered vitally important for achieving the outcomes, particularly with respect to the development of new projects.

The review confirmed the significant contribution of the ZIP committees and Stratégies Saint-Laurent (SSL) through their ongoing coordination and mobilization of communities around local and regional issues. During the gradual setting up of the regional round tables (RRT), the role of the ZIP committees evolved appropriately as coordinators and mobilizers within the integrated management of the St. Lawrence (IMSL), because the ZIP committees oversee the coordination of the majority of the RRTs.

Implementation of research, outreach and protection or restoration projects

Research, outreach and protection or restoration projects were implemented, some of which involved the participation of communities. Gaining new knowledge of St. Lawrence ecosystem priority issues is the main objective of joint action projects carried out by federal and provincial government stakeholders and participating not-for-profit organizations. The majority of these joint projects were completed as planned and achieved many of their objectives.

SLAP intervention projects in the field (outreach, protection and restoration) are mainly carried out by organizations receiving ZIP and CIP funding under the Canada-Quebec Agreement. The review confirmed that through the G&Cs program, these subprograms fostered good community

participation. The results also confirmed that the ZIP committees implemented the bulk of the activities funded by the ZIP Program and that the CIP projects were completed as planned. The two programs met their expected outcomes and often exceeded the original objectives. They benefitted the communities, as well as the areas or regions beyond those initially targeted.

SLAP governance

The review confirmed that SLAP governance is backed by available scientific and technical knowledge. The SLAP allows people at various levels in the federal and provincial governments to share scientific knowledge and data, create synergies and make contributions in keeping with their respective fields of expertise. They also provide additional input to research and monitoring activities on the state of the St. Lawrence River and to the Numerical Environmental Prediction Program.

Program design

The SLAP program activities and priorities correspond to the objectives of sub-program 1.3.5 (St. Lawrence) and of the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy (FSDS). Overall, the design of the SLAP is appropriate. SLAP activities were implemented in an integrated manner, with collaboration among the main government stakeholders. The review also found that the ZIP and CIP programs are important and unique.

Overall, the administrative procedures are appropriate.

Continuation of the 2011 to 2026 Canada-Quebec Agreement on the St. Lawrence

The Agreement is vitally important because it facilitates collaboration between the two levels of government over the long term. The SLAP helps the various federal and provincial departments with a mandate pertaining to the St. Lawrence River to carry out their mandate consistently and sustainably. The SLAP is also a gateway for dealing with issues that require joint action, collaboration and science.

3. What could be improved

As with any program, some aspects could have been done differently or better.

Governance and program management

Overall, the SLAP governance structure is clearly defined, appropriate and effective, but it lacks flexibility to be able to benefit from related projects without Canada-Quebec collaboration. It is also not very receptive to short-term projects or new projects underway that are submitted for funding or one-time partnership. According to a number of stakeholders, it would be appropriate to include related activities or projects that do not involve Canada-Quebec collaboration, but which are nonetheless important to the success of SLAP joint action projects.

Furthermore, the accountability of government stakeholders to the SLAP stems from their participation in the activities of the monitoring committees (MC) and working groups (WG). The basis of this participation is essentially grounded in the will and the commitment of individuals. In addition, stakeholders use their own operating budgets to contribute to the SLAP, which can be subject to internal pressures such as restructuring and the reordering of priorities.

Participation

The Agreement stipulates that various stakeholders, including the Coordination Committees (CC), are to participate in the Forum on the St. Lawrence, so they can express their concerns to all of the actors who participate in the integrated management of the St. Lawrence. It was reported that, during the final phase of the SLAP, fatigue had set in terms of the participation of some sectors in the forum (such as Indigenous people, private-sector companies, the industrial sector and non-government environmental organizations).

The review also brought to light that the Forum on the St. Lawrence does not attract as many or as a broad a variety of stakeholders as expected. The review confirmed that the Forum is not effective in attracting stakeholders in some key sectors, particularly municipalities and industrial firms. The Forum on the St. Lawrence will have to be modified to attract a greater number of stakeholders and to take into account the role that could be played by the Regional Round Tables (RRTs) set up during the 2011 to 2016 phase of the SLAP. The Agreement Secretariat is also considering having the RRTs play a lead role in organizing the next Forum.

Program efficiency and alternative solutions

In general, the business and administrative procedures related to the Agreement management structure are adequate and support effective implementation, given the number of stakeholders and the joint aspect of the Canada-Quebec Agreement

The fact that the joint action projects are basically carried out with the base budgets of the participating departments constitutes a risk, because these projects can be exposed to budget

changes on an ongoing basis. The available financial resources are insufficient, and the mechanism for resource allocation is not effective in fostering the achievement of the expected SLAP outcomes.

Funding for the ZIP Program could be reviewed in the light of the ability of the ZIP committees to implement their joint activities. In addition, the CIP program no longer meets the demand, given the growing number of funding requests and the amount of funding available for the program. To help recipients be as effective and efficient as possible, decisions regarding funding for ECCC's CIP projects should be made more quickly (for example, no later than February for projects submitted during the October submission period).

Ongoing Agreement programming does not necessarily ensure the long-term success of the SLAP. Among other strategies, ECCC will have to continue to rely on its ability to manage effectively the current and emerging issues affecting the St. Lawrence River ecosystem.

Availability of research data and findings

SLAP research and monitoring data and findings are made available, but primarily to stakeholders within the SLAP. General information on activities and projects implemented under the SLAP is disseminated to government stakeholders in the Le Phare [the Beacon] newsletter. Although the information is available within the various committees, the review confirms that there is little or no sharing of information on joint action projects among the groups or committees.

Data and results of the State from the St. Lawrence River Monitoring Program and some data on joint activities are made available to the public on the SLAP and the St. Lawrence Global Observatory (SLGO) internet sites. However, the number of articles on priority issues posted on the SLAP website decreased significantly during the final phases, thus limiting access to the results of the Joint Action Program and the Numerical Environmental Prediction Program (NEPP).

Objectives and performance measurement

The SLAP played a central role in ensuring consistency and monitoring of the actions taken by various stakeholders to manage priority issues. However, the objectives of protecting and conserving the St. Lawrence ecosystem will not be achieved in the medium term, because there is growing pressure, the issues are continually changing and the needs are ongoing.

The Program on the St. Lawrence gathers and uses SLAP performance data. However, the review found that there are gaps in the performance measurement strategy. In fact, only a small amount of data is used for reporting purposes within the Department.

The Agreement does not have specific targets with respect to the achievement of SLAP objectives. Although the State of the St. Lawrence Monitoring Program provides many interesting indicators, there are no mechanisms to monitor the achievement of SLAP objectives related to the common issues of biodiversity conservation and sustainable use or new substances affecting St. Lawrence River ecosystem water quality and health.

4. Lessons learned

Using the preceding analysis as a basis, the evaluation team identified a few lessons learned. They are not recommendations. Rather, they are suggestions put forward to help improve the SLAP and any similar program in the future. In addition, some strategies specific to the SLAP are included for the consideration by the program.

Program governance and management

With respect to program governance and management, it is suggested that all programs:

- examine the flexibility of the governance and joint action planning, to be able to benefit from the interaction among related projects put forward by stakeholders
- examine the governance structure to take into account the integrated management of the program
- examine the role of the consultative committees in the governance structure

Potential strategies. SLAP governance is supported by available scientific and technical knowledge. It allows the various federal and provincial levels of government to share knowledge and scientific data, and create synergies based on their respective and complementary areas of expertise. The review suggested some potential strategies that the SLAP might consider implementing in the future:

- encourage Agreement stakeholders who sit on the Agreement Steering Committee to share information on the opportunities or initiatives developed within their respective organizations and that might supplement SLAP joint actions
- identify and implement ways to integrate the activities of the CCs, RRTs, ZIP committees and the Forum on the St. Lawrence more effectively in the overall SLAP governance structure
- clarify the mandate of the various CCs, to adapt it to the challenges of coordinating their respective theme-based activities, and foster their participation in activities carried out by the integrated management of the St. Lawrence, through the Forum on the St. Lawrence and the RRTs
- clarify the coordinating role of the RRTs within the SLAP, taking into account the role of the ZIP committees in coordinating St. Lawrence River issues and the activities of the RRTs, which have a broader mandate

Performance measurement

With respect to Program performance measurement, it is suggested that all programs:

- include, where possible, scientific indicators and objectives, to meet the Program needs more effectively

Potential strategies. The main objective of the joint action projects carried out by the federal and provincial governments is to gain new knowledge about the priority issues facing the St. Lawrence ecosystem. The majority of the joint action projects have been implemented as planned and have achieved a number of their objectives. However, the review of SLAP activities suggested the following potential strategy that the SLAP might consider implementing in the future:

- develop and implement performance measures for sub-program 1.3.5 (St. Lawrence), including an updated logic model, defined performance indicators and objectives for expected outcomes and a performance reporting strategy

Availability of research data and findings

With respect to the availability of research data and findings, it is suggested that all programs:

- consider developing and implementing a knowledge management strategy and databases

Potential strategies. Research data and findings, including the results of the State of the St. Lawrence River Monitoring Program, are posted on the SLAP and St. Lawrence Global Observatory websites. However, the number of articles on priority issues posted has decreased significantly during over the past phase. The SLAP review suggested some potential strategies that the SLAP might consider implementing in the future:

- engage SLAP government stakeholders and encourage their increased participation in the development and implementation of a communication and dissemination strategy for SLAP knowledge and databases
- make the development and dissemination of plain language document and the transfer of knowledge to communities and the public a priority for future iterations of the SLAP
- encourage the involvement of stakeholders, for example, by raising stakeholder awareness and meeting with stakeholders to encourage them to make greater use of products, findings and lessons learned

5. Conclusion and management response

This review only covered ECCC's SLAP activities for the period from 2011 to 2015, under the 2011 to 2026 Canada-Quebec Agreement on the St. Lawrence.

Management provided the following response to the lessons learned.

Management response
The 2011 to 2026 Canada-Quebec Agreement on the St. Lawrence continues to be a very important and unique national model of government collaboration, particularly in terms of the environmental outcomes achieved and their positive impact on St. Lawrence River protection and conservation. The continuation of this constructive collaboration will help to strengthen the relationship between Quebec and Canada that have existed since 1988, as well as with other stakeholders interested in protecting the St. Lawrence ecosystem. Following the renewal of the 2016 to 2021 SLAP program, the Coordination Office improved the reporting mechanisms by incorporating into the performance measurement process indicators on the development of the science and the restoration of priority ecosystems, specifically by using State of the St. Lawrence Monitoring Program results (Overview of the State of the St. Lawrence). The SLAP Coordination Office also made efforts to strengthen the existing partnerships and enter into new ad hoc collaborative arrangements with organizations or to establish strategic linkages with government initiatives (for example, the International Joint Commission (IJC) and the Oceans Protection Plan). This came about through the inclusion of new projects in the 2016 to 2021 SLAP program. It includes a project on the cumulative effects of marine transportation and some activities related to the IJC study of Lake Champlain and the Richelieu River. The objective of the latter is to protect the ecosystem and ensure better forecasting of floods. As part of implementing the integrated management of the St. Lawrence, a new formula for organizing the Forum was developed, to improve coordination among decision makers, users and members of civil society affected by the management and uses made of St. Lawrence River resources. The communication and dissemination of results is very important for program visibility and partnerships. In keeping with that perspective, the coordination office took steps with the Quebec government to revamp the website and greatly improve access to information. The coordination office also set up a communications committee made up of representatives from various SLAP partners, to write the results of SLAP activities and projects in plain language and disseminate the material to the public. The coordination office expanded its contribution to the protection of freshwater resources by sharing its expertise, so that other department areas outside that of the SLAP could benefit from it in carrying out their own activities. Participation in the departmental study of the Ottawa River watershed is one example. In addition, to encourage greater participation of Indigenous groups in the SLAP, the coordination office increased its involvement with these communities through citizen

science and youth projects, as well as by disseminating and sharing information through an open data portal. These initiatives support the achievement of departmental priorities, promote closer relationships with Indigenous communities and support the protection and conservation of freshwater resources.

It is important to note that the planning of SLAP joint actions is done with the base budgets of 18 participating departments and agencies. This constitutes a risk for the implementation of activities and projects registered under the Canada-Quebec Agreement on the St. Lawrence. The joint programming is thus continually exposed to budget changes. To manage this risk while highlighting the Department's priority issues, the coordination office is working to make ECCC branches and other federal partners and the province involved in the SLAP more aware of the importance of their participation.